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Authors	Houck, Kelly
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***Abbas Kiarostami and Film-Philosophy*, by  
Mathew Abbott. Edinburgh University Press,  
2016, 176 pages.**

Kelly Houck

Mathew Abbott's book, beautifully adorned with a now iconic still from *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bād mā rā khāhad bord*, 1999), explores the late Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's later films through the framework of film-as-philosophy. The book offers an analysis of cinema as a medium of serious philosophical production through a chronological case study of Kiarostami's films, beginning in the introduction with *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gīlās*, 1997). Abbott draws on the work of philosophers ranging from Ludwig Wittgenstein to Noël Carroll, as well as Middle Eastern scholars such as Hamid Dabashi, to investigate the real theoretical work Kiarostami's films accomplish. Throughout the text he weaves two major threads of inquiry: what happens to reality when we screen it, and how film creates problems of knowledge. Abbott argues that film does not merely illustrate preexisting philosophical ideas, instead, cinema carries out a specific kind of thinking.

The book's primary concern lies in the philosophical problems, questions and abstractions that Kiarostami's films formulate, complicate, and negotiate. The central problem Abbott explores is Kiarostami's characteristic technique of interrupting the viewer's relationship with the film, and how these moments of interruption function. The author investigates how the filmmaker harnesses technology and directorial techniques to confuse, but ultimately reinforce, the relationship of the spectator to the screened image. Abbott argues that these moments, where the filmmaker abruptly disorients the viewer and upsets their claims to knowledge, rather than separate the viewer from the film, actually pull the viewer in further. Another major point the author explores is what he terms the relationship of the real to the fake, invoking and assessing Kiarostami's insistence on his ability to record truth. Specifically, he examines to what extent the filmmaker's deliberate switch to video at the end of *Taste of Cherry*, and its use throughout *ABC Africa* (2001) enables him to emphasise the spectator's awareness of the medium and film's ability to make claims about truth.

Abbott is not interested in delineating Kiarostami's vision of the world, nor the defining aesthetics of his oeuvre. Instead, Abbott's attraction to Kiarostami's filmography lies in what he clarifies as the filmmaker's ability to "draw a particular kind of philosophical significance out of narrative and characters, and to render philosophical commitments and fantasies with significant political and cultural purchase" (13). In the book's seven chapters, the author explores the way Kiarostami's films embody film-as-philosophy, beginning with a first chapter on *The Wind Will Carry Us* and ending with *Like Someone in Love* (2012). By moving through the filmmaker's body

of work in a chronological manner, Abbott is able to document the progression of his experimentation with directorial techniques, and each film's relationship with its predecessor and successor. In each chapter, Abbott focuses on one film and one central philosophical idea, using Kiarostami's methods to consider, confuse, or push existing philosophical debates further.

Throughout the book Abbott returns to the ideas of belief and scepticism, considering the claims to authenticity and truth suggested by the use of documentary footage, and even expressed by Kiarostami himself in interviews. *The Wind Will Carry Us* provides the perfect basis to an opening chapter for a work on film philosophy, as the film's meta-narrative quality engages essential questions concerning the viewer's belief in the images the filmmaker presents. As Abbott aptly demonstrates, the protagonist's unfulfilled quest to document a premodern traditional ritual brings the question of the nature of belief to the fore. The film prompts the viewer to reflect on the impulse to accept the images presented in documentary footage as true, and furthermore to believe in that truth. Namely, that even a documentary film purporting to show the authentic, true qualities of its subject has been framed by a filmmaker with a specific goal in mind. Abbott, citing Gilles Deleuze, concludes that ultimately, "what the filmmaker wanted, and what we wanted along with him, is not necessarily belief itself, but the belief that others believe" (38). In the case of *Ten (Dah, 2002)*, the use of technology at first seems to render belief in its narrative almost imperative, as the directorial presence is seemingly absent. However, Abbott accomplishes a deeper reading, suggesting that in actuality, "we are not called upon to believe in the content of the film ... yet nor are we simply asked to suppose it imaginatively" (71). Instead, Kiarostami leaves the spectator suspended somewhere in between.

The relationship between distance and absorption is another of the book's major themes. The author identifies the opposition between distancing a viewer from a film and drawing a viewer into a film as one of the fundamental concepts that Kiarostami complicates. In his analysis of *Shirin* (2008), Abbott draws on Michael Fried's work on absorption and theatricality (89–96). In *Shirin*, the camera focuses on the faces of Iranian actresses as they react to a film depicting the epic of *Khosrow and Shirin*, which the spectator cannot see. For the author, Kiarostami's fixation on the women's faces as they watch a film relates to Fried's argument that photography of audiences in a cinema creates a distance between the photographic and filmic experiences. However, in Abbott's view, Kiarostami does not create that distance, because, "Shirin reflects on the problematic status of cinematic absorption *with cinematic means*" (89–90; emphasis in the original). This assertion leads the author to an intriguing, original thought: that we should consider "cinematic absorption without presupposing it is a function of illusion" (94). In the introductory and concluding chapters, the author cites the ending sequence of *Taste of Cherry* as the essential example of his films' theorising on distance and absorption. *Taste of Cherry* ends with the abrupt insertion of the film crew into the shot, which seems to violently thrust the spectator out of the viewing mode established by the film up until that point, yet simultaneously implicates the spectator deeper into the viewing process. Roger Ebert famously detested the film, commenting that the ending sequence constituted "a tiresome distancing strategy to remind us we are seeing a movie". Abbott takes a different stance, noting that, for Kiarostami, playing with such distancing techniques is "fundamental to his own directorial strategy" (144).

In many instances, Abbott pushes back against popular readings of Kiarostami's films in a productive way. One case concerns orientalist and antiorientalist readings of *The Wind Will Carry*

*Us*. He rejects Hamid Dabashi and Azadeh Farahmand's critical readings, whom Abbott sees as dismissing the film for "deliberately performing an ethnographically inclined Third World exoticism" (39). Abbott astutely complicates their readings, by clarifying that their real critique concerns the film the protagonist is making rather than the film Kiarostami is making. While the author agrees there should certainly exist space to think critically about the mechanisms bringing Kiarostami's particular brand of Iranian cinema onto the international art cinema stage, he suggests that, in this case, such criticisms should be reevaluated. In another case, he contests Alberto Elena's reading of *ABC Africa* in terms of a reality–fiction dichotomy, wherein Kiarostami's self-insertion into the frame should be understood as an interference. Instead, for Abbott, Kiarostami's interest lies in recording the landscape as it is, rather than making a statement about the competing objective and subjective interpretations of documentary film.

The structure that Abbott chose for his book is strategic and straightforward. The author presents seven concise chapters, each claiming one film as its central subject through which he parses the philosophical concepts at hand. By selecting a film-by-film structure, the book functions as a chronological reading of Kiarostami's later career, charting the course of the filmmaker's cinematic, philosophical, and technological interests. A possible alternative structure would have been entirely thematic, wherein the author could examine concepts that Kiarostami raises and molds across multiple films together in one space. With a thematic approach, one could engage in a deeper reading of the issue of faces and bodily indexes that figure heavily in *Shirin*, and also, rather memorably, at the end of *ABC Africa*. One could also examine more closely the Derridean notion of Kiarostami's signature (32–33), i.e. long, winding, rural roads, which protagonists traverse in films like *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *Where is the Friend's Home* (*Khāneh-ye dūst kojāst?*, 1989). Yet another possible route would be technology's role in constructing the metanarrativity present in *Taste of Cherry*, *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and *Close-Up* (*Nemā-ye nazdīk*, 1990). Though, certainly, Abbott would not be the first scholar to comment on these issues.

The author's selection of films, though justified, deserves comment. Despite the fact that Kiarostami had been making films since the 1970s, this book takes the 1997 release *Taste of Cherry* as its starting point. The effect of such a choice on the popular perception of Kiarostami's films must be acknowledged, for two reasons. First, by situating his first Cannes-awarded film as "a kind of watershed in his artistic development, definitively marking his arrival as a great filmmaker" (2), the book risks replicating patterns of auteurist thinking and upholding structures of taste-making rooted in elitist viewing practices. This risk is particularly relevant in the case of global filmmakers, because of the significant power of the European gaze as a mediating force of film festivals (Wong 122). In the case of non-Western films, Bill Nichols sees film festivals as akin to museums or tourist sites, drawing Western spectators in with the promise of an almost ethnographic experience (19). Second, by excluding his pre-1997 films, the book ignores films focusing on child protagonists, suggesting that films about children cannot do the same caliber of philosophical work as films focusing on adult protagonists. Though he occasionally references some of these films, like *Life and Nothing More* (*Zendegī va dīgar hīch*, 1992), their exclusion implies that films about children are less important, valuable, or intellectually productive. Of course, Abbott's justification that the films made from the 1970s through 1990s have been studied to a greater extent than his more recent films is valid. Yet, these older films would have served as productive case studies for the methodology employed in this book.

This text would serve scholars of media studies, philosophy, world cinema, and even the casual Kiarostami fan interested in theoretical approaches to film. For students of Iranian cinema, Abbott's approach will be refreshing, intriguing, and rewarding. A minor complaint is that occasionally the author dwells too long on plot description; the third chapter in particular suffers from an unnecessary amount before delving into an argument. In addition, Abbott's training as a philosopher naturally conditions his approach to the material. For example, scholars of Iranian cinema will notice the absence of Persian-language sources. The author makes a concerted effort to include English-language scholarship from Iranian-Americans, but Iranian, Persian-language sources would certainly add valuable perspectives to the work. Minor criticisms aside, Mathew Abbott has crafted a wonderful book with which he brings Iranian cinema further into the fold of serious film-philosophy study.

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**Kelly Houck** is currently a PhD student in Persian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on Iranian cinema and the emergence of children's media in Iran in the twentieth century. She teaches Persian at the beginning and intermediate levels.